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ABSTRACT

A compilation of interviews with Bruce Jilk provides his views on "cutting edge" educational facility planning from around the world. Included are discussions on an Egyptian K-12 school design influenced by Muslim and Greek site plans; the Zoo School design, often referred to as a model for the design of learning environments; and the fine-grain educational system concept that takes education out of the building and spreads it throughout the community. Mr. Jilk's explanation of why he believes in small neighborhood K-14 schools which are designed for other uses 25 years later concludes the interview. Contains 15 references. (GR)

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Bruce Jilk

Randy Fielding

Home
Sharm El Sheikh
Zoo School

Design-Down Process
(link to article by B. Jilk on CEFPI site)

At right: Sharm El Sheikh School, Plan Abstract

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An Interview with Cuningham Group's Bruce Jilk

Randy Fielding, Editor, November 27, 1998.

This article is a compilation of three discussions between Bruce Jilk and Randy Fielding in 1998. The first one took place at the CEFPI conference in Vancouver, British Columbia; the second at the Zoo School in Apple Valley, Minnesota, and the third at the Gardens of Salonica restaurant in Minneapolis. While some of the language is directly quoted, other portions have been paraphrased for clarity

Bruce is often referred to as a "cutting edge" educational facility planner, yet he builds on sources from 500 B.C. to the present. Synthesizing the educational philosophies of John Dewey, the psychological constructs of Abraham Mazlov and the planning principles of the "New Urbanism," Bruce sets forth a vision for learning environments which will make schools as we know them obsolete. There is no arrogance in his viewpoint; Bruce is an ambassador in the world of planning, traveling around the globe continuously, learning from other cultures while developing new plans for learning environments.

RF: Tell us about the Sharm El Sheikh K-12 School in Egypt which you recently designed.

BJ: The metaphor for the project is the "City of Discovery." The plan was influenced by ancient Hebrew, Muslim and Greek site plans, which were developed in relationship to a particular landscape and topography, rather than a rectilinear grid. Spaces are organized along an axis at various angles, allowing for variety and surprise as you move through space.

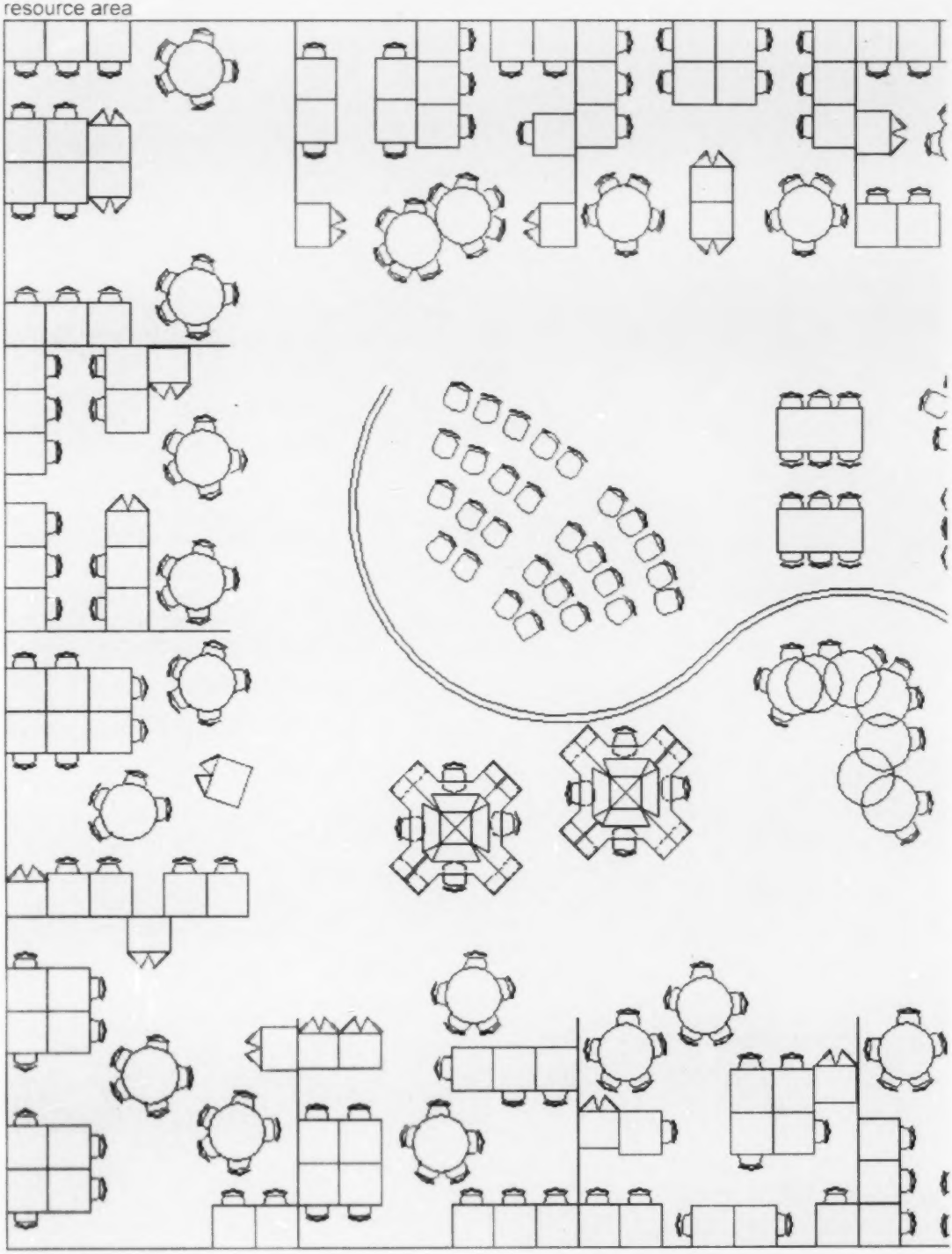
RF: You have said that 90% of learning is informal. The many angles of the plan, in contrast to a more typically rectangular layout, give it a more informal feel. One can imagine that the various views and spatial experiences along the way are in fact like a "City of Discovery."

A key element of the Sharm El Sheikh plan is the 100-student "family/cluster." How does this ft into your current approach to educational programming?

BJ: The school is organized into four pre-kindergarten - 8th grade "family/clusters and two high school "families" of 100 - 120 students. Each family is made up of a series of ten 10-12 student work groups arranged around a flexible, technology-rich resource area. The arrangement is similar to the High School of Environmental Studies in

Apple Valley, Minnesota (Zoo School), completed in 1995. (Bruce planned the Zoo School while at Hammel Green & Abrahamson, prior to joining the Cuningham Group).

Below partial cluster plan from The Sharm El Sheikh School, showing individual workstations, workgroups, and the central resource area



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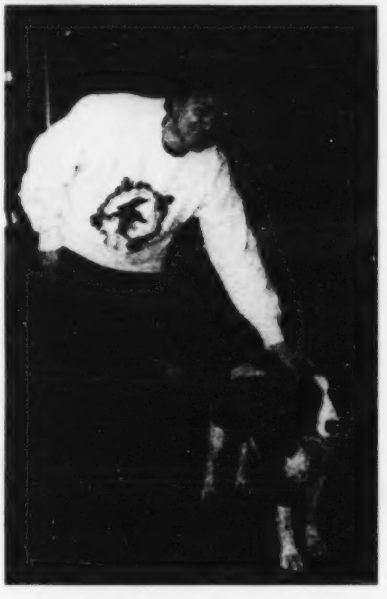
RF: The Zoo School is often referred to as a model for the design of learning environments. What are the keys to its success?

Zoo School Work Group

BJ. Abraham Mazlov talked about the basic need for identity - to belong. It's unlikely that this will occur in a 2,000-person high school. However, the Zoo School, with 400 students, organized into ten-student workgroups, responds to the need for identity.

RF: How does the concept differ from the open classroom of the seventies?

BJ: There are several areas where the Zoo School differs: First, the Zoo School utilizes an interdisciplinary curriculum; students approach subjects in a cohesive manner, learning about the scientific, social and civic aspects of an issue all at once. Second, the focus is on project-based learning; students develop skills while pursuing a specific interest. Third, the organization of the school into family / cluster units and personalized workstations brings a cohesive order to the whole, in contrast with the more chaotic "open classroom" of the seventies.



RF: Dan Bodette, principal, said: "We are in our 4th year, without a single fight, incident of graffiti or theft." How do you account for this? (Dan is pictured at right with the school's dog, Bess).

BJ: Read John Dewey's "Experiencing Education." He writes about social controls, or a sense of caring as a way of achieving order, rather than the "guard tower approach." The scale and organization of the Zoo School fosters caring and a sense of belonging.

The Grain of Community

RF: When we spoke at the CEFPI conference in Vancouver recently, you talked about the need for a "finer grain" in educational planing. Can you tell us about this?

BJ: Look at a U.S. zoning map and you will notice that different land uses are designated by color in large blocks. There is a huge block of residential use, a huge block of commercial use ... like "boulders." This is a course grain approach, comprehended only from an airplane. Some communities, common in Europe, have a medium grain, comprehensible from an automobile. I propose that we move to a fine grain approach, best perceived by pedestrians.

RF Is this like the idea of people "living over the store, favored in "The

"I believe in small neighborhood K-14 schools; I would design them so that they could be used for something else in 25 years." Bruce Jilk

New Urbanism" movement?

BJ Yes, except that while the New Urbanism is conceptually fine grained, the learning environments included in New Urbanism-inspired plans are still planned as boulders.

RF: What does a fine-grain educational system look like?

BJ: It means we take education out of a huge, citadel-like block and spread it throughout the community. It doesn't make sense to separate learning from living and working. When we locate schools in separate buildings, surrounded by parking lots, with guard-tower like approaches to security, we are making the world's problems worse, not better.

At a fine grain level, learning is interspersed with the businesses, homes, and institutions that make up their communities.

RF: You said that you believe in small, neighborhood K-14 schools, which should be designed so that they can be used for something else in 25 years. Does this relate to your concept of fine-grain planning?

BJ: Yes. For the present, many educational systems require that we build and maintain separate school facilities. If we have to segregate learning in school buildings, the most cohesive approach includes a small school, accommodating a broad range of ages, closely linked to the local community.

In 25 years, learning will be interspersed with the businesses, homes, and institutions that make up their communities, making schools as we know them obsolete. In terms of quality and timeliness, businesses have more knowledge than schools. Schools have old stuff. If you want the new stuff, you go to labs, businesses and the internet.

RF: I understand that you are involved in the planning of two new communities in Australia, which will incorporate these principles now, rather than in 25 years. Can you tell us about this?

BJ: Many of the principles incorporated into the Zoo School and Sharm El Sheikh will be developed to another level in Australia. We are building on the workstations and family/clusters, defining larger units, with terms like "Enterprises," (300-600 people), "Collaboratives," (up to 10,000 people) and the "Global Network," (everyone). I'm not at liberty to discuss the details now, but stay tuned!

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Many of the references below are from Bruce Jilk's article "Future Designs for the Learning Environment," and can be found in Design Share's bookstore.

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